

THE METEORIC ADVENTURES OF COME-ON CHARLEY

By
Thomas Addison

MR. TEETERS took the letter from the bellboy, closed the door, and wheeled around to Mr. Carter.

"It's a special delivery for you, Come-On," he stated, and walked slowly over to him.

Mr. Carter was lounging in an easy-chair by the window of his sitting-room in the Hotel Rirebien. Mr. Joseph Link, ex-middle-weight champion of the squared circle, was seated facing him.

"Who is it from, Skeeters?" asked Mr. Carter.

"Jonas Hogg, Hotel Espanola, West Thirty-second street!"

At this Mr. Link, who was Irish, ranted in derision and remarked: "Faith, there's an English pig in he wrong sty. Do you know the animal, Charley?"

"You can search me," invited Mr. Carter. "What does he want, Percy?"

Mr. Teeters sat down and opened the letter.

"Ha!" he sniggered as he spread out Mr. Hogg's epistle on his knee. "Ha! See who's here! Little 'Liza Ann' has took her pen in hand. Yeh, I know it! It's signed 'Jonas Hogg, per A.' That stands for 'Liza Ann, don't it?'"

"Read the letter first, Percy. Get busy!" commanded Mr. Carter crisply.

So Mr. Teeters began hurriedly.

"My Dear Sir: I am alone in a strange city, and confined to my room with valvular heart trouble. Hardship in the Far East brought it on, and worry has accelerated the progress of the disease. Right here let me say it is not financial worry that afflicts me, for I have with me in my room, in hand reach, the equivalent of one hundred thousand dollars. It is my care of this property which is causing my sleepless nights and is aggravating my disease."

"In my extremity I have decided to turn to you for assistance. I do this because I believe you and your associates, Mr. Joseph Link, to be honest, reliable and resourceful men. I have read about you in the papers, and the way you handled that gang of swindlers in the Titanic case—the 'Liza Ann' picture—has convinced me that my fleas could be safely intrusted to your keeping."

"His what?" queried Mr. Link, putting his hand to his right ear as if in doubt of that particular organ's accuracy.

Mr. Teeters went back and read the note again.

"His fleas—Liza Ann."

"Go on, Skeeters," enjoined Charley. "Wants to give us fleas. What for?"

Mr. Teeters reached down and scratched a purely imaginary bite on his scraggy shank as he went on:

"These fleas constitute the property valued to me, in short, a fortune in cash. I will not attempt particulars in the brief confines of a letter, but will direct your attention to the attached clipping from the Evening Star of recent date."

Mr. Link interjected a skeptical grunt here, but Mr. Teeters continued evenly:

"To sum the matter up in a word, I am in danger of losing my fleas. In a few days that danger will have passed. If you will come to me on receipt of this and take charge of my fleas, I will pay you liberally, and I will compensate you liberally, and I will be doing a kindness to one who is hovering on the brink of the grave."

"Oh, I say, Joe!" exclaimed Charley. "Poor chap! In bad. What?"

Mr. Link's compassion, however, was not so easily evoked.

"Read the newspaper clipping, Percy, me lad," he requested Mr. Teeters.

"Wait—here's a tag at the bottom of the letter," spoke up the secretary.

"I am his nurse. If you come, please be careful and do nothing to excite him. It might prove fatal. L. A."

"You see?" said Charley to Mr. Link.

"Give us the Scream stuff," insisted the fighting man abruptly.

Mr. Teeters complied, and any one who will take the trouble to refer to the files of the Evening Star for the current year will find the news item precisely as it is here set forth:

Chicago, Oct. 2.—George Parkinson, the eminent parker, is said today, on the authority of Alfred Bonwit of the Chicago Academy of Natural Sciences, to have paid \$5,000 for a specimen of a rare variety of flea—of the kind which is occasionally found in the skin of the sea otter. The flea will be added to Mr. Parkinson's famous entomological collection.

"Gollanigh!" squealed Mr. Teeters, throwing aside the letter.

"Come down before you fall!" Mr. Link admonished the soaring secretary.

Then he turned to Mr. Carter.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"Don't know," said Charley.

"What do you think?"

"Well," returned the pugilist with ponderous deliberation, "I've not had much of an opinion of fleas up to now; but if you can show me one that's worth five thousand jingles, I'll let it choose its own place to eat me, and I'll take off my hat while it's doing it."

Charley looked thoughtful.

"Sounds straight," he said. "Only—there's the woman."

"What of it?" inquired Mr. Link, unable to discover the connection.

"Why," argued the secretary, "she's a trained nurse! Get that? And a church steeple is as crooked as a pig's tail alongside those blue-gingham sisters. They'd make a ramrod look like a string of Z's."

"Is that so?" Mr. Link laid a stress on the pronoun which was intended to carry a doubt of so sweeping an assertion.

"Yes, that's so!" affirmed Mr. Teeters, belligerently. "And besides—there's the fleas!"

Charley bestowed a quizzical glance on the master of the gloves.

"Sure, Joe. There's the fleas."

"Let's go see this Itchy-like. Come-On," implored Mr. Teeters. "He's a dying man, he says—on the way to Crookville. We ought to help him check his trunk."

"By George!" said Charley. "Guess you're right. Call the car."

Mr. Teeters crossed to the telephone and called up the garage. The lively yellow touring car in which he had burst upon the astonished eyes of Broadway a few weeks back was now a thing to get about—a memory only. For Mr. Carter had become the owner of a big 'sixty' whose hue would pale a ripe tomato into dim obscurity.

There was a knock at the door and he swung about and opened it.

A stout man stood in the doorway bowing apologetically. His face was smooth and well featured, and his clothes could have been worn by a banker with credit to himself and his tailor.

"I beg pardon," said this gentleman pleasantly. "My name is Herbert Nuckels."

He advanced a little into the room and looked inquiringly at the prize fighter. Charley made the introduction.

"Mr. Link," said he, with a wave of the hand. "Have a chair."

Mr. Nuckels assured him, "I'll be forward and helped himself to a seat. His eyes lingered for a bare instant on the letter which Mr. Teeters had thrown on the center table."

"I took the liberty of coming up unannounced," he apprised Mr. Carter. "My errand has to do with a letter—a special delivery, from Mr. Jonas Hogg."

Charley and Mr. Link involuntarily glanced at the letter. Mr. Teeters was staring open mouthed at the speaker.

"Oh, you have received it, I see," went on Mr. Nuckels blandly. "I thought I had allowed it time enough to get to you."

"I say," said Charley, "talk turkey. Busy."

"I'll detain you only a moment," Mr. Nuckels assured him. "Hogg wrote to you about the fleas, of course. I chanced to be in the Espanola's office when he sent the letter down, and saw the address. That's how I'm here. I would like to know what Hogg's proposition is."

At this Mr. Link broke his silence. He leaned forward and addressed Mr. Nuckels with a consideration quite foreign to his usual manner.

"Maybe you won't mind telling us, colonel, where you come in on this flea layout? You'll allow it's only a fair question, seeing as we haven't met you much before today. Is Hogg a friend of yours?"

"Friend?" Mr. Nuckels expelled the word from his interior with bitter sarcasm. "Friend? He's a traitor, sir! He's trying to do me out of my interest in those fleas!"

"By George!" said Charley.

Mr. Nuckels made a deprecating movement with his hand.

"Oh, he's not a crook, Hogg isn't," he demurred. "I spoke too hastily, perhaps. He'll play straight enough with you. But he's cutting up with me. I staked him to his trip to Suez and down the Red Sea, where he got the fleas. Cost me \$5,000; and now he claims I'm only due a third interest. He says he's ruined his health, and shortened his life, and is entitled to more than me."

"Got any papers to show?" demanded Charley.

"Unfortunately, no. It's my word against his."

"Ha!" interposed Mr. Teeters. "We ain't seen him yet."

Mr. Carter ignored this interruption.

"The fleas. What about them? All right?" he inquired of Mr. Nuckels.

"The fleas?" Mr. Nuckels' voice took on a note of fervor. "They are wonderful! The rarest specimens in the world. Nothing like them in any of the collections. Why, sir, they are priceless!"

Charley got up, and stepping to the table took from it Mr. Hogg's letter. He ran his eye over it. Mr. Link and Mr. Teeters watched him closely. He was acting curiously, it seemed to them.

"Hogg says he's got lung trouble. Hemorrhages," Charley mentioned casually.

"What? He says that?" Mr. Nuckels' surprise was manifest.

"Why," he scoffed, "Hogg must be crazy to tell you that! His lungs are good as mine. He has heart disease—valvular enlargement. And that's the mischief of it; his nurse won't let him talk with me. She says any violent emotion will kill him. I'm up a stump. Can't move one way or the other, and I want your help."

Charley held out his hand.

"Shake!" he said. "You're straight. Here's Hogg's proposition."

He offered Mr. Link the letter and grinned at Mr. Nuckels, who chuckled at his appreciation of the bit of strategy.

"Hogg as I thought," Nuckels observed. "Jonas has the idea that I'm trying to get his fleas away from him. He's wrong. I only want a square deal."

"Fair," said Charley.

"Are you going to see him?" questioned Mr. Nuckels.

"Sure," said Charley. "Right away."

"Are you going to keep the fleas for him?"

"Can't say," answered Charley. "Depends."

Mr. Nuckels frowned to himself. Then he said, speaking earnestly:

"Jonas is dickering with somebody, but I can't find out who. He'll want the fleas back when he's ready to close the deal. Let me know when that is, and I'll make it worth your while—something handsome, sir. What do you say?"

Charley pondered this for a moment.

"Come around tomorrow," he replied. "Same time. Talk it over."

He turned abruptly and walked into the next room. Mr. Nuckels seemed somewhat taken aback at this unceremonious dismissal. He coughed and looked at Mr. Teeters. That individual was staring blankly after

THE RED SEA FLEAS

Charley. Mr. Nuckels looked at Mr. Link and raised his brows. And then he went out carrying himself with the mien of a man who is faring well, as far as he can spy out the road before him. When he reached the street he hurried to a telegraph office and sent off a message. Then he lighted a cigar and strolled leisurely down Broadway.

Charley and Mr. Teeters found their top-coats comfortable as they bowed southward from the Rirebien.

"We got to be careful, Come-On, how we spill the chatter with this gink we're going to see," observed Mr. Teeters. "We got to remember he's running a bum pump under his slats. The nurse says it'll croak him if we get his goat."

When the car drew up before the Hotel Espanola Mr. Teeters uttered an expression of disgust.

"Know you both, by reputation," he remarked. "Everybody does. Be seated, Miss Amory!"

She's skipping again! The digitalist! She's putting his palms to his chest and rolled his eyes. The nurse ran to the bureau and dropped something from a bottle into a medicine glass. Miss Amory held the glass to the sufferer's lips and he swallowed the dose. It seemed to have a miraculous effect, for almost instantly he brightened up.

Charley looked around, and spying a chair at the table set down on it. There was a wastebasket under the table, and he pushed it a little with his feet to get it out of the way. Mr. Teeters deposited himself on a sofa by the wall.

"Here are the fleas," said Mr. Hogg, taking the box from the table. "In this humidor, Miss Amory, a straight chair, please."

The nurse fetched one from a corner, and he was about to seat himself when some one knocked on the door. "Come in!" he commanded.

"See who it is," he commanded.

Charley let his eyes stray about the room. At length they rested on the waste-basket at his side. And then, as he looked, an old light crept into them.

"Presently he took his handkerchief from his pocket, it slipped through his fingers and fell to the floor, and he bent down from his chair to recover it. When he had accomplished this, the handkerchief was wadded up in his hand until a ball. He dabbed his forehead with it—for the room was warm—and returned it to his pocket."

"It'll get me yet," gasped Mr. Hogg with an air of resignation. "But I've made my name! Hogg's Fleas will wake 'em up when my deal with Parkinson is known. He's buying them all to keep them out of other collections. See the point?"

Charley grinned at him, meanwhile working the basket back under the table, very softly and very slowly, with his feet.

"Sure," he responded. "Cornered the flea market." He pulled out his watch and glanced at the time. "Gee! Half past one! Got to leave. Engagement."

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phone rang and saved his face. Mr. Teeters answered the summons.

"Hey, Come-On!" he reported, at the same time muffling the instrument. "That guy Nuckels is in the office."

"Tell him to wait. Coming down," Charley instructed him. He jumped up and then, with an afterthought, addressed the middle-weight. "Want you to go with me Thursday, Joe. See Hogg. Interesting."

"But," began Mr. Link.

Charley cut him off.

"Want you. Won't take no. Nine o'clock from here."

"Oh, all right," assented Mr. Link. "Anything to oblige." He rose to his feet.

"Wait a while," requested Mr. Carter. "Got a reason?" He grinned and added: "Say, Joe, put the gloves on with Skeeters. Keep him out of mischief."

With this preposterous suggestion he left the two to a strained companionship.

Mr. Nuckels came forward as Charley stepped from the elevator.

Mr. Nuckels shot a glance at him.

"Have you got the fleas?"

"The fleas?" Charley asked.

"Can I have a look at them?"

"Hogg has 'em," Charley answered.

"Oh!" Mr. Nuckels showed disappointment. "Well, when does he close the deal? When are you going to take them back?"

"Perhaps I won't, myself," Charley told him placidly.

"What?" Mr. Nuckels now showed alarm.

"Secretary. May send by him," said Charley. "Or messenger boy."

Mr. Nuckels appeared to be genuinely perturbed by this announcement.

"Say!" he cried. "That won't do at all. You're responsible for those fleas."

"Sure," said Charley.

He looked at the big clock over the desk.

"Got anything more to say? In a hurry?"

Mr. Nuckels cast about him with his eyes, as if seeking an apt reply.

"I'll say this," he blurted out. "I'll give you five thousand dollars if you'll let me when Hogg wants those fleas back, and if you'll take them yourself. I want somebody present I can trust."

Charley shook his head.

"Ten thousand!" urged Mr. Nuckels in his extremity.

Charley frowned reflectively.

"Spot cash? Half down? Now?"

Mr. Nuckels recoiled from his indignation.

"And you a millionaire!" he vociferated.

"Not on your life! I'll pay you when we get to Hogg's."

"Good-by," said Charley quietly, and turned away. The interview was finished at least so Mr. Nuckels believed.

"Wait!" he entreated.

Charley walked rapidly on. Mr. Nuckels ran after him.

"I'll say," he stuttered, and there was anguish in his voice. "But it's not regular! Come over here in this corner."

Charley followed him stolidly. Mr. Nuckels extracted from his pocket a tremendous roll of bills and counted off from it five thousand dollars. He handed this to Mr. Carter with pained reluctance.

"I have your word of honor that you'll bring the fleas yourself?" he catheched, boring into Charley with his glittering black eyes.

"Sure thing," Charley said. "Meet me Thursday. Half past nine. Hogg's hotel."